

Co-chairs Senator McCrory and Representative Currey, Ranking Members Representative McCarty and Representative Berthel, and distinguished members of the Education Committee:

My name is Stefan Keller and I am a Hartford resident and I am testifying in support of SB1095: An Act Concerning School Resource Officers. This bill is a small step towards ensuring every student feels safe in their school and towards an education system that is focused on care instead of punitive measures that cause more harm.

Several years ago I worked at a high school in Bridgeport as part of an AmeriCorps program and I was struck by the stark differences that existed from my own high school experience growing up in the mostly white, middle-class town of Bethany. My high school experience included no metal detectors, no security guards, several counselors and social workers available for support, a college resource center, and many other amenities and supports for students and families. I felt safe and comfortable there in school. The same could not be said for the school in Bridgeport. Students entered the school through metal detectors and there was a frequent police presence in the school. There were only a few counselors for a school of over 1,000 students and the social workers only had capacity to work with students who had documented special education needs and even then their caseloads were too large. This was not a school environment where students felt safe or comfortable, quite the opposite, and many young people felt they could not get the support or resources they needed.

It is in environments like these when needed resources are not available that schools rely on the systems that exist to solve problems even when those systems may not be best suited to actually solve the problem at hand. Without enough funding for social workers, counselors, conflict mediators, behavioral support staff, socioemotional learning specialists, and other people within a school that holistically support a student's physical, mental, and emotional needs, the school system relies on police to respond to problems and crisis that they ultimately do not solve and in many cases simply exacerbate the problem. In Fact, based on a [report by CT Voices for Children](#), School Resource Officers (SROs) had no impact on academic performance or the number of behavioral instances in schools. The only data point SROs had a significant effect on was the rate at which students were arrested in schools. This makes absolute sense. If schools have a SRO they are going to use them to respond to crises that schools without an SRO would use other resources to solve. And since an SRO is a police officer, the response to a crisis is more likely to include arrest even if that is an unnecessary solution. Even more alarming is the racial disparities that exist in these arrests. In schools with an SRO, Black students were 17 times more likely to be arrested while white students were 6 times more likely to be arrested. As mentioned earlier, the racial makeup of a school does not correlate with the presence of an SRO so that means that when an SRO is present, Black students are more likely to be arrested in comparison to white students.

All of this data leads to a logical question. If SROs do not reduce behavioral incidents, increase academic performance, make schools safer and actually end up perpetuating racial injustices then why are we using them? Young people are speaking up across the state about the resources they do need in their schools. They want more mental health support, they want more counselors, they want more access to socioemotional learning and resources. We should listen to them. These resources can actually respond effectively to crises and keep students safe and uncomfortable in schools instead of being arrested for an incident that did not warrant a strong punitive response. Honestly, if we really want to see these problems solved we need to address systemic issues such

as housing insecurity, poverty, and lack of quality healthcare which go beyond the classroom and call for more systemic policy changes and solutions.

Passing SB 1095 will not solve all these systemic problems but would be an easy, incremental step toward a new system of support and accountability for students. By mandating training in alternatives to outdated punitive exclusionary discipline and expanding the professional training that someone filling that role could have beyond criminal justice, schools will build capacity to respond to student needs in deeper and more healing ways. The long term benefits of using restorative justice approaches in combination with behavioral health resources would allow schools to repair, rather than reproduce, harm and build stronger, more inclusive communities across the state.

I strongly urge you to pass SB 1095 out of committee and onto the legislature as a starting place towards building school environments that are safe for all students to learn, grow, and thrive in.

Thank you for your time.

Stefan Keller
Hartford, CT 06105